

CHARLES DEMUTH



AMERICAN ARTISTS SERIES

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FOREWORD

THIS book is one of a series devoted to the work of various American artists and is published by the Whitney Museum of American Art, founded by Gertrude V. Whitney. The purpose of these books, like that of the Museum which sponsors them, is to promote a wider knowledge and appreciation of the best in American art.

For assistance in preparing this volume for publication, we wish gratefully to acknowledge our indebtedness to the Kraushaar Galleries and An American Place for information regarding paintings used for illustration, to The Arts magazine for the loan of its files of photographs, and to the museums and private collectors whose paintings, reproduced in this book, add so notably to the value of the illustrations.

JULIANA R. FORCE, *Director*
Whitney Museum of American Art



Photograph by Alfred Stieglitz

CHARLES DEMUTH

CHARLES DEMUTH

BY

WILLIAM MURRELL

OF Demuth's work it has been written and said that it has charm, subtle harmonies, exquisitenesses of suggestion, and delicacies of statement; that it is light, whimsical, and ironic; and that it is cool, clear, sure, and elegant.

But the problem before me is whether or no it is possible to analyse, define, describe, or otherwise throw light on this charm and delicacy, this irony and elegance. And whether these words actually relate to anything in Demuth's work. Or rather, what words, as signs or symbols, do so relate?

For response to painting is a very complex and varied experience. It is made up of many visual stimuli and emotional associations which may be pertinent, but which more often are not. These cut in upon and plunge through one another in much the same way as in a doubly exposed motion picture film, we get a curious interweaving of conflicting images. But all such films are exact records, and if we could but separate the exposures, we could clarify the confusion. With a film that would be impossible, yet something similar might be attempted with our involved responses to painting.

The work of Demuth, judged even by the words quoted above, would seem worth the effort. And some of his own words about painting might indirectly tell us something about him.

"Paintings must be looked at, and looked at, and looked at—they (I think the good ones) like it. They must be understood, and that's not the word either, through the eyes. No writing, no singing, no dancing will explain them. They are the final, the *nth* whoopee of sight. A water-melon, a kiss may be fair, but after all have other uses. 'Look at that!' is

all that can be said before a great painting, at least by those who really see it."

Obviously this tells us that he does not at all believe in what we are trying to do. Not so obviously, yet I think none the less positively, the whole paragraph, in its capricious phrasing and exotic word combinations, tells us that he is very wilful, that he has a touch of mysticism, and a strong dash of intellectual dandyism.

If this is so, the study of his work will corroborate it. If it does not, then that will be because other qualities of character will have been shown forth in stronger fashion.

Demuth's statement expresses a firm belief in the Art For Art's Sake theory and in its corollary of unique aesthetic emotions. Without pausing to question the validity of that attitude, it is unquestionable that he does not regard art as a social function. And a glance through these reproductions will prove that he has no sympathy with what Shaw calls the undeserving poor, nor with the daily occupations of average humanity, nor indeed with anything except the activities of cultivated leisure. In a word, he is more hedonist than humanist.

Yet within this apparently limited compass Demuth has developed a wide range of interests through the fineness of his perceptions. And the peculiar quality of his aesthetic curiosity has evolved an unusual flexibility of method and approach. For Demuth is essentially of the twentieth century, not of the last decade of the nineteenth. He quickly recognized that the effete imitative aestheticism of the nineties could not, to a lively and curious intelligence, compare favorably with the stimulating discoveries of his own day. And these discoveries had the attraction which the new and the unapproved always have for the ardent young.

Neo-impressionism aimed at the expression of greater intensity of feeling by means of conscious exaggerations of line, of generalized forms, and of strongly contrasted color; while Cubism sought, through the sim-

plification of planes and research into nature, to emancipate art from naturalism and romanticism. Both movements received impetus from the study of primitive and archaic work, and both were characterized by a decided tendency towards abstraction.

When Demuth first went to Paris, a few years before Europe went to war, the strife for and against these movements was at its height. But he did not need to be convinced: he was fascinated. These large sweeping rhythms, these clean cut cylindrical, conic, and cubic shapes: he loved them at first sight. Later he perceived that they too were formulas, and that their value depends upon the use that is made of them. Yet it was his kind of thing. He recognized it. He absorbed it. He fell in with Duchamp and others of Les Jeunes, and he became one of the first American moderns.

If we are to profit by or make use of tradition in the arts we must get down to its bare flesh and bone. And if there is any one thing emphasized above all others by what today is called modern art it is a careful analysis of the technique of expression, a strict discipline in the rejection of the turgid and the flamboyant, and of all clichés of attitude and method. And from this analysis and discipline we have observed the gradual growth of a new plastic idiom, clean cut, succinct, compressed.

Now in a consideration of Demuth's work all of the above must be accredited to our past experience. To face his paintings without this background would be to depend upon associations and pre-conceptions relevant enough to ourselves but mostly irrelevant to the purpose. I have said: Demuth, within an apparently limited compass, has developed a wide range of interest through the fineness of his perceptions. And that the peculiar quality of his aesthetic curiosity has evolved an unusual flexibility of method and approach.

His illustrations to Henry James's *Turn of the Screw* and *The Beast in the Jungle* are instances of extraordinary imaginative sympathy and suppleness of execution. Demuth implies that the figures in James's

great ghost story are themselves ghosts—wraiths evoked by the luminous mind of their author. And he presents these unreal people with a vividness that comes as a shock, and a sensitiveness that is comparable only to the words of James himself. The real tragedies of minute embarrassments, and of the too long unspoken word—these are rendered by Demuth in drawing that is deceptively loose, deliberately nervous, utterly unconventional. And the water color serves to heighten the grimness, the pathos, or the blankness of the chosen moment.

But here perhaps we are too much under the spell of the great novelist. Let us look at some of Demuth's vaudeville and circus things. In these we get the external gaiety of the separate spectacles; but implicitly, as though we watched the acrobats and dancers ourselves, we get a sense of the monotony and futility of their movements. This suggestion is not insisted upon however; Demuth does it as lightly as though he were raising an eyebrow or shrugging his shoulders. He was interested primarily in the opportunities and challenges offered to his skill.

It is in his still life paintings that we begin to realize Demuth's importance. These too are water color, but here he uses color creatively: design is for color, not color for design. In these studies of flowers, fruit, and vegetables, the discipline imposed by the modern technique is evident. Indeed Demuth submits himself to an almost ascetic rigor, but it is for his own and not for rigor's sake. He makes use of it, bends it to his purposes, infuses it with his vision. His drawing is sometimes a complete statement, sometimes an important suggestion, yet it is the color that demands our attention. Demuth creates his color more by contrast than by harmony, and often forces the white paper itself into service as background. They are really very nice, these still-lives, we say to ourselves, as we respond to clarity, to distinction, to certainty—and then a sense of their inevitable rightness breaks upon us. The color becomes body and life, and from pleasure we pass to satisfaction. And as Demuth himself once said of another exhibition: "*That* was a moment!"

The current tendency to include Demuth in that group of painters whose aesthetic is dominated by modern industrial architecture and machinery seems ill-advised. True, Demuth has painted steamship funnels, grain elevators, and smoke stacks, but to mistake a similarity in choice of subject for a similarity of interest is to exhibit very poor judgment. There is an important difference between what Lowes (in *The Road to Xanadu*) calls "a distillation of the stuff of general experience" and a deliberate fabrication. The attitude of the group in question seems overdetermined and tense. Its members seem victimized by the topical fallacy, they feel they *must* recognize the machines and structures characteristic of their own time. Demuth too is impressed by these symbols of his age, but he is not obsessed by them. He accepts them without constraint. His interest developed out of his water colors of New England Colonial architecture as far back as 1917. He later used tempera in his structural paintings, presumably because it admits of greater precision and a more suitable "final surface." The underlying abstract foundations of these studies is never too obvious, and his treatment of backgrounds by beams or shafts of light is a contribution that not only emphasizes his design but relates the whole to universal law.

Demuth attempts nothing heroic in size or what is loosely called epic in conception. His power is in the freshness of his perception of the particular. The luscious and the robust, the rich and the full, are apparently not to his liking. He does not imitate surfaces, and he seldom strives for tactile values. And if we look for these qualities, his painting is apt to seem a little thin and dry. We are puzzled and at first perhaps repelled by a disconcerting detachment. The intellectual dandyism mentioned on another page is evident in this slightly disdainful attitude. His sensuality is refined to such a degree that we suspect a mystical note in all this brilliant, suave, and skilful work. And it is there. Yet even in his mysticism Demuth maintains his aloofness. He does not symbolize emotional states of mind by means of association-forms and images. He con-

trives to achieve his "moment" by the sensitive manipulation of form and color. His subject matter is literal enough, but his symbolism is abstract; an evocation from the perfect adjustment of means to an end. And this is perhaps the only kind of mysticism acceptable in painting.

BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

CHARLES DEMUTH was born in Lancaster, Pa., in 1883. His family, of German origin, has lived in America since the early 18th century. He commenced the study of drawing and painting under Thomas P. Auschutz at the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, Philadelphia, Pa. In 1907 he went abroad, remaining about a year. In 1911, 1912 and 1913 he made other visits to Europe, working there independently. With the exception of some work done in Paris, his painting has been produced chiefly in New York City, in Lancaster, Pa., where he has lived since 1921, and on Cape Cod where he has spent some of his summers.

He has exhibited in this country and abroad and is represented in many private collections, and in the following public institutions: Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, N. Y.; Brooklyn Museum of Arts and Sciences, Brooklyn, N. Y.; Art Institute of Chicago, Chicago, Ill.; Barnes Foundation, Merion, Pa.; Phillips Memorial Gallery, Washington, D. C.; Fogg Art Museum, Cambridge, Mass.; Gallery of Living Art, New York, N. Y.; and the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, N. Y.

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ARTICLE BY
CHARLES DEMUTH

"Across a Greco is written," *Creative Art*, 1929—v. 5, pp. 629-634; illus.
part col.

ILLUSTRATIONS

Illustration for "Distinguished Air"
by Robert MacAllmon (*Water color*), 1930

H. 16 inches W. 12 inches



MY EGYPT, 1925

H. 35 $\frac{1}{4}$ inches W. 29 $\frac{1}{4}$ inches

Collection of Whitney Museum of American Art



PLUMS (*Water color*), 1925

H. 18 inches W. 12 inches



CALLA LILIES (*Water color*), 1929

H. $13\frac{3}{4}$ inches W. $19\frac{3}{4}$ inches



STILL LIFE (*Water color*), 1926

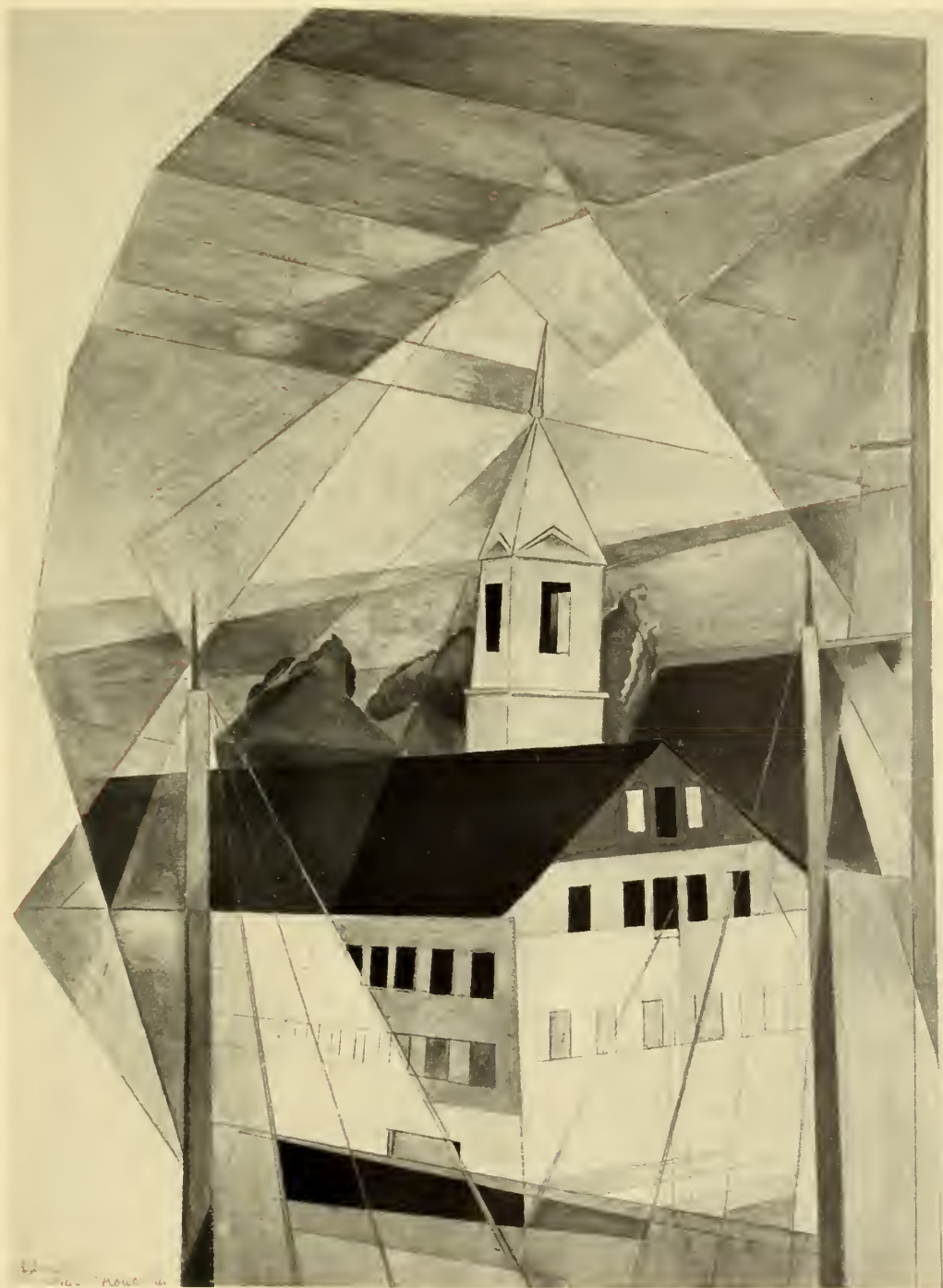
H. $13\frac{3}{4}$ inches W. $19\frac{3}{4}$ inches



STILL LIFE (*Water color*), 1925
Collection of Mr. Ferdinand Howald, Columbus, Ohio



A BOX OF TRICKS (*Tempera*), 1921
Collection of Mr. Morton R. Goldsmith
Scarsdale, N.Y.



64 - 16 - House in

AFTER SIR CHRISTOPHER WREN, 1920
Collection of Mr. Ferdinand Howald, Columbus, Ohio



MODERN CONVENIENCES, 1920
Collection of Mr. Ferdinand Howald, Columbus, Ohio



END OF THE PARADE: COATSVILLE, PA.

(*Water color*), 1920

H. 20 inches W. 16 inches

Collection of Mr. William Carlos Williams

Rutherford, N. J.



NEW ENGLAND (*Tempera*), 1919
H. 19 inches W. 15 $\frac{3}{4}$ inches
Collection of Mr. Scofield Thayer, New York



AUGUST LILIES (*Water color*), 1921

h. 12 inches w. 18 inches

Collection of Whitney Museum of American Art



Illustration for "The Turn of the Screw"
by Henry James (*Water color*), 1918

H. $8\frac{1}{16}$ inches W. $10\frac{5}{16}$ inches

Collection of Mr. Frank Osborn, New York



"She had picked up a small flat piece of wood."

"A lens."

"Quinty -"

Illustration for "The Turn of the Screw"
by Henry James (*Water color*), 1918

H. 8 inches W. $10\frac{5}{16}$ inches

Collection of Mr. Frank Osborn, New York

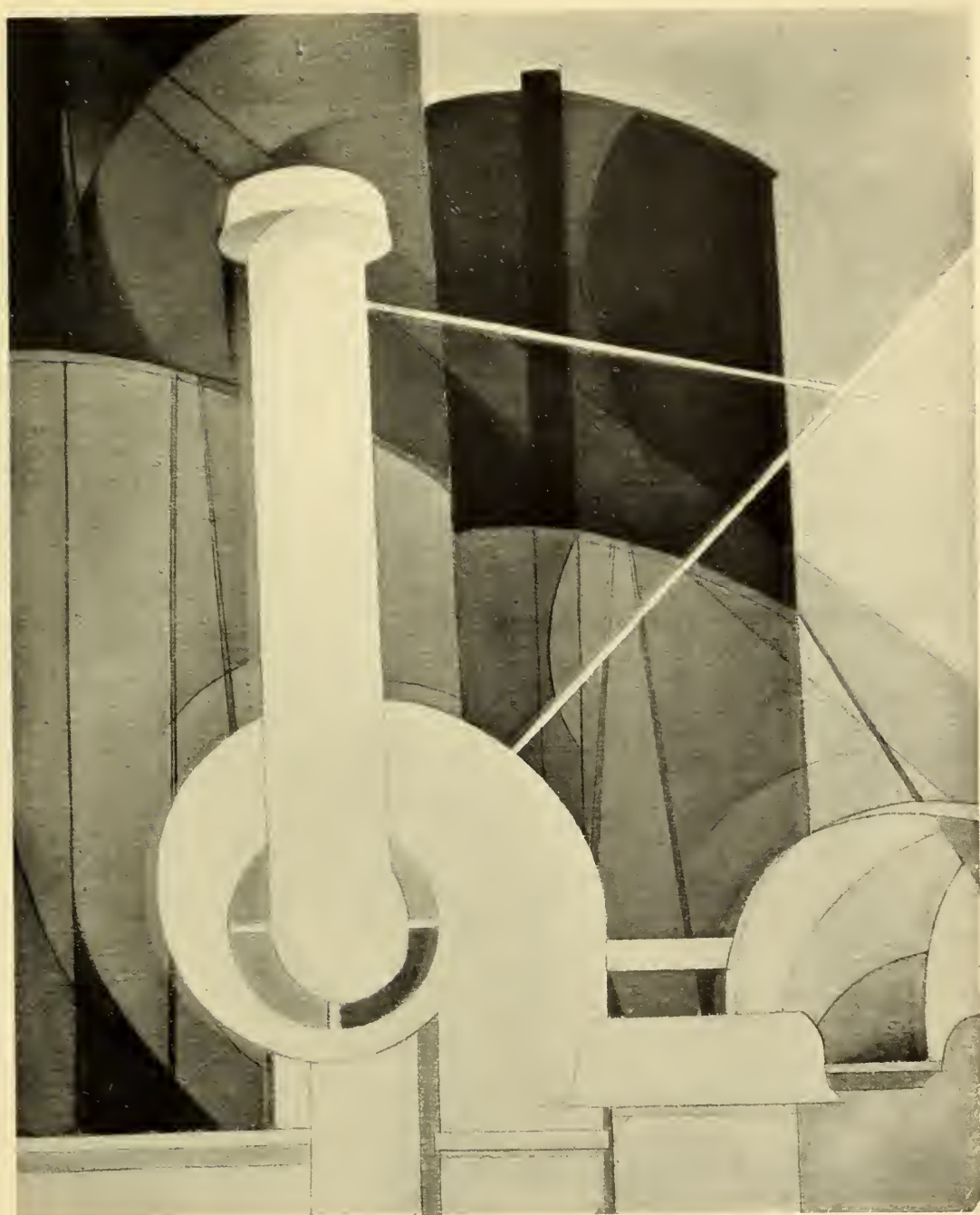


IN VAUDEVILLE (*Water color*), 1919
Collection of Mr. Ferdinand Howald, Columbus, Ohio



PAQUEBOT, PARIS, 1917

Collection of Mr. Ferdinand Howald, Columbus, Ohio



AT MARSHALL'S (*Water color*), 1917
Collection of The Barnes Foundation, Merion, Pa.



DAISIES (*Water color*), 1918

H. 18 inches W. 12 inches

Collection of Whitney Museum of American Art



IN VAUDEVILLE (*Water color*), 1917
Collection of The Barnes Foundation, Merion, Pa.



TREES AND BARNS (*Water color*), 1917

H. 9 inches W. 12 inches

Collection of Miss Susan W. Street, New York



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